

QUELLE

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Documentation in Real Time: Jewish Archiving in a Digital Age. The National Library of Israel's Bearing Witness Archive

Bearing Witness is the National Library of Israel's initiative to collect materials related to the events of October 7, 2023, and their aftermath, both within Israel and globally. Reflecting the Library's enduring mission to preserve the cultural memory of Israel and the Jewish people, the project aspires to create a comprehensive, publicly accessible digital repository of materials. A central priority is ensuring maximum accessibility, beyond the NLI's physical walls and into the online space. In part due to this commitment, the focus is strongly on digital materials.¹

Unlike traditional library collections, which tend to consist primarily of formally published texts, Bearing Witness seeks documentation in all forms. This includes books, articles and academic papers, but also extends to social media posts, websites, videos, photographs, oral and written testimonies, artworks, diaries and personal documents. The project's primary purpose is to preserve documentation of the events of October 7, frequently in collaboration with other archives, libraries and documentation projects. However, it also collects materials that capture the post-October 7 world. Naturally, these differ widely depending on the depositor's geographic location, political perspective and personal context. The end objective is to build an interlinked archive of all October 7-related documentation for the historical record.²

The archive encompasses materials from the Jewish diaspora as well. Almost immediately following the attacks, reports of antisemitic threats and vandalism surged — and remain elevated. Equally important has been the emotional response of Jewish communities worldwide: Some expressed solidarity with Israel; others responded with discomfort, criticism or grief. We have therefore collected extensive material from highly engaged and deeply affected areas, such as US university campuses and European communities.

The scope of collection spans not only October 7 itself but the ongoing events triggered by it. From the first ceasefire to the killing of six hostages in August 2024, or even the riots at the Amsterdam football match, the project documents the ripple effects of the original attack. This broad lens ensures a faithful reflection of the unfolding historical moment.

Background and Process

The project's initial phase was driven by existing NLI staff, who immediately recognized the historical gravity of the moment before them. Drawing on pre-existing web archi-

¹The authors would like to thank Maya Gan-Zvi (Project leader, Bearing Witness), Dr Raquel Ukeles (Head of Collections, NLI), and Abby Horowitz (Selector, NLI USA) for support in this article.

²Gan-Zvi, Maya: The Bearing Witness Archive: Documenting October 7th and Its Aftermath, in: Contemporary Jewry 44 (2024), p. 817–819.

ving infrastructure, they began documenting websites and social media. The staff also collaborated with oral history experts and other archives to offer guidance and support to many grassroots collections initiatives that developed in the days after October 7. A few weeks later, an online form was launched to allow local and global contributors to submit their own materials. But it soon became clear that a more structured effort was required. A dedicated team was hired, led by a project manager with professional experience in knowledge and information management. Archivists began uploading and cataloging materials to internal servers, while selectors were tasked with identifying and securing deposits from key individuals and organizations. Each selector oversees a specific geographic region—Israel, Europe or North America—or language (e.g., Hebrew, Arabic, etc.) beginning with extensive mapping to identify diverse potential depositors across the social, political and religious spectrum. Our deliberate outreach is a key tenet of building the collection to be inclusive, varied and representative of Israeli and diaspora populations.

Real-Time Documenting vs. Traditional Collection

Real-time archiving differs fundamentally from traditional retrospective documentation. Libraries typically gather published materials post hoc, once events have been analyzed and crystalized by hindsight. Real-time documentation, by contrast, captures materials as events are still unfolding.

This approach has multiple advantages. First, it preserves materials that might otherwise disappear. Unlike in previous eras, today it is everyday people who document events with phone cameras, voice notes and video clips. This means both an increase in the number of materials and a lower chance of them being preserved unless someone makes a deliberate effort to do so. Most famously, Hamas' body camera footage, though widely disseminated early on, was quickly removed from major platforms. But there are many more examples: Video clips of people taking down hostage posters outside of Israel are frequently found circulating the Internet for a few weeks before vanishing; many activist groups produce posters, digital flyers and banners without intending to keep them in the long term; and memorial stickers stuck onto Israeli bus stops in commemoration of fallen soldiers and Nova victims, though not intended to last, are a documentable and insightful phenomenon.

Real-time materials are also far more diverse than traditional sources. Our archive includes content not only from academics and journalists, but also from activists, artists, schoolchildren and eyewitnesses. Preserving digital-born materials as unfiltered primary sources can offer insights difficult to replicate in later narratives. A prominent example of this is the barrage of antisemitic threats posted on October 7 on Sidechat, an anonymous campus social media app, which captures the sudden uncertainty of Jewish student life in the US. Many of these were collected from the earliest moments of the crisis.

Collecting in real time also enhances the quality of metadata, a factor particularly important for digital-born materials, which are harder to track and authenticate.³ Crucial

³ Caswell, Michelle: Instant documentation: Cell-phone-generated records in the archive, in: *The American Archivist* 72 (2009), p. 133–145, here p. 140–141.

details such as source dates and locations are easier to track when materials are still fresh and their creators known. Better yet, contributors are able to share the stories behind their materials, effectively giving them a chance to communicate directly with the future viewers of their materials. These contextual details enrich the archive and allow future researchers to determine source authenticity more easily. Perhaps most crucially, real-time collection facilitates securing the contributor's consent, ensuring that their materials can be shared in alignment with stringent privacy and ethical standards.

Challenges

Despite its promise, real-time documentation presents significant challenges. Few relevant precedents exist. The Rosenzweig Center's 9/11 archive, which started documenting four months after the events, was innovative both in its emphasis on digital materials, and on its focus on the impact of 9/11 on everyday Americans, who were invited to contribute their materials.⁴ A memorable example was the heart monitor of a Brooklyn jogger, whose heartbeat was recorded speeding up at 8:46, the moment the first plane hit.⁵ More recently, Harvard University's Ukraine Research Institute began to archive the Russian invasion just a month after it started using a prominent web archiving platform.⁶ Another digital archiving project tracing live developments in recent years has been that of the "Cloud Caliphate" conducted by scholars from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and West Point Academy, who accessed and archived the Islamic State's largest known online platform for the purposes of analysis and counter-terrorist research.⁷

But none of these align fully with Bearing Witness. The Rosenzweig archive predated widespread social media use, as well as essential channels like WhatsApp, which families used to communicate from their shelters. The Ukraine archive focuses on websites, not social platforms or multimedia. West Point's work, while rigorous, is a closed research tool rather than a public-facing archive. Moreover, there is no shared protocol for documenting real-time crises.⁸ Perhaps creating one is impossible given the unique circumstances presented by each disaster. Part of the challenge of Bearing Witness is simply that it is a pioneering project, treading on barely ventured ground.

Ethical considerations abound. Tragedy always demands sensitivity, but real-time documentation involves especially raw material. Some of it includes disturbing footage or graphic images. The team must constantly evaluate what can be made public, what should

⁴ Haskins, Ekaterina: Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age, in: *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37 (2007), 1, p. 401–422.

⁵ Harris, Jeanene: Rosenzweig Center's 9/11 Archive was one of the first of its kind, in: *George Mason University News*, 9/9/2021, online at: <https://www.gmu.edu/news/2021-09/rosenzweig-centers-911-archive-was-one-first-its-kind> [5/5/2025].

⁶ Burgess, Anna: November 21, 2022. "Rushing to save her homeland - or at least its story", in: *Harvard Gazette*, 21/11/2022, online at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/11/archive-documents-russia-ukraine-war-in-real-time/> [12/05/2025]. This is not to be confused with a number of similar initiatives, including the closed-access Ukraine War Archive (ukrainewararchive.org), or the Ukrainian Archive (Ukrainianarchive.org) which archives and facilitates war investigations for journalism, criminal justice and human rights purposes.

⁷ Ayad, Moustafa/Amarasingam, Amarnath/Alexander, Audrey: The Cloud Caliphate. Archiving the Islamic State in Real-Time. Institute for Strategic Dialogue / Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 2021, p. 102, online at: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-cloud-caliphate-archiving-the-islamic-state-in-real-time/> [12/05/2025].

⁸ Howard, Rachel/Fox, Heather/Daniels, Caroline: The Born-Digital Deluge: Documenting Twenty-First Century Events, in: *Archival Issues* 33 (2011), 2, p. 100–111.

be restricted and what should be preserved without being made accessible initially. The balance between prioritizing historical significance and deferring to the emotional needs of victims and families is, of course, delicate. By continuously revisiting such cases, the NLI aims to build a clear policy and ethical code for future use in the documentation of disasters and tragedies.

The project is also shaped by ongoing political and emotional volatility. In the diaspora, the rise in antisemitism has sparked increased concern for our depositors, who are mostly Jewish. While many are eager to record their stories, others fear backlash. The option to delay public release, by years or even decades, offers a middle ground. We can also limit access options to protect sensitive materials, making them readable only within library walls.

In Israel, concerns differ. Some worry that their contributions might later be misused by political actors. Others, particularly survivors and bereaved families, are still grappling with trauma and unsure of the consequences sharing such vulnerable material may bring in future. Each situation demands a careful, resource-intensive ethical evaluation.

Successes and Impact

Despite the complexity of the undertaking, Bearing Witness has achieved substantial success. Around two million files have been deposited, both through signed formal agreements and via online submissions, many by recurring contributors from around the world. Web archiving has also played a major role, with approximately 500 million digital web items collected to date, including websites, podcasts and social media accounts. These materials reflect the extent to which modern Jewish history both takes place and is preserved online. Plans are underway to make these web-based materials accessible to researchers and the public.

As the public's priorities have shifted, so have the types of materials collected. This has resulted in a striking diversity of materials. In the project's early phases, memorials and testimonies dominated.⁹ The Library partnered with various organizations, mostly within Israel, to collect first-person accounts. Among these was the Library's own initiative, in collaboration with Yad Vashem, which recorded testimony from residents of the Gaza border communities. These videos are now available on the Bearing Witness website with English subtitles. As the war has evolved, we have witnessed our materials do the same. At the beginning, there was an uptick in materials containing prayers and support for soldiers. Abroad, advocacy content, particularly condemning antisemitic bias, has abounded. And, both in Israel and abroad, we have received a copious stream of materials fighting for the release of hostages.

The project has also forged connections across the Jewish archival world. New collaborations have emerged with Jewish libraries, cultural institutions and community organizations from diverse ideological, religious and cultural backgrounds. Many depositors view contributing their materials as an act of both preservation and testimony. The sense of meaning they report corresponds with a number of studies that examine the

⁹ Cohen, Ahava/Taga, Ester: Authority Work as Memorial to the Victims of October 7th and the Swords of Iron War at the National Library of Israel, in: *Judaica Librarianship* 23 (2024), p. 84–91.

power of archiving in solidifying identity and even in countering “symbolic annihilation” experienced by marginalized communities worldwide.¹⁰ Given the very real annihilation suffered by communities in Israel throughout the war period as well as the maligning of Jews of diverse political beliefs worldwide, this has proven perhaps the greatest unforeseen benefit of Bearing Witness: It has made people of all backgrounds aware of their power in telling their story as part of the ever-unfolding Jewish history. We have truly enjoyed sharing our responsibility of preserving the cultural memory with them.

Conclusion

Bearing Witness will hopefully become a living, evolving record of a most profound turning point in recent Jewish history. As the events of October 7 continue to reverberate, the project represents a shift in how memory is preserved, moving beyond the library as a static repository solely for the collection of format works, toward an institution that documents history as it happens alongside part of a wider public. In doing so, the National Library of Israel is not only preserving the cultural memory, but also hopes to democratize and enrich the ways in which future generations will understand, study and engage with this defining moment.

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¹⁰ Kaplan, Elisabeth: We are what we collect, we collect what we are: Archives and the construction of identity, in: *The American Archivist* 63 (2000), 1, p. 126–151; Caswell, Michelle: Seeing yourself in history: community archives and the fight against symbolic annihilation, in: *The Public Historian* 36 (2014), 4, p. 26–37. For a similar discussion in the context of October 7 testimony, see Mikel-Arieli, Roni/Bejarano, Margalit/Reifen-Ronen, Judith (eds.): *Documentation of Events of October 7, 2023, and the Swords of Iron War: Articles and Self-Documentation Essays* [=Remembrance and Research. The Journal of the Israel Oral History Association (2024), 5].